

TERMS TO UNDERSTAND



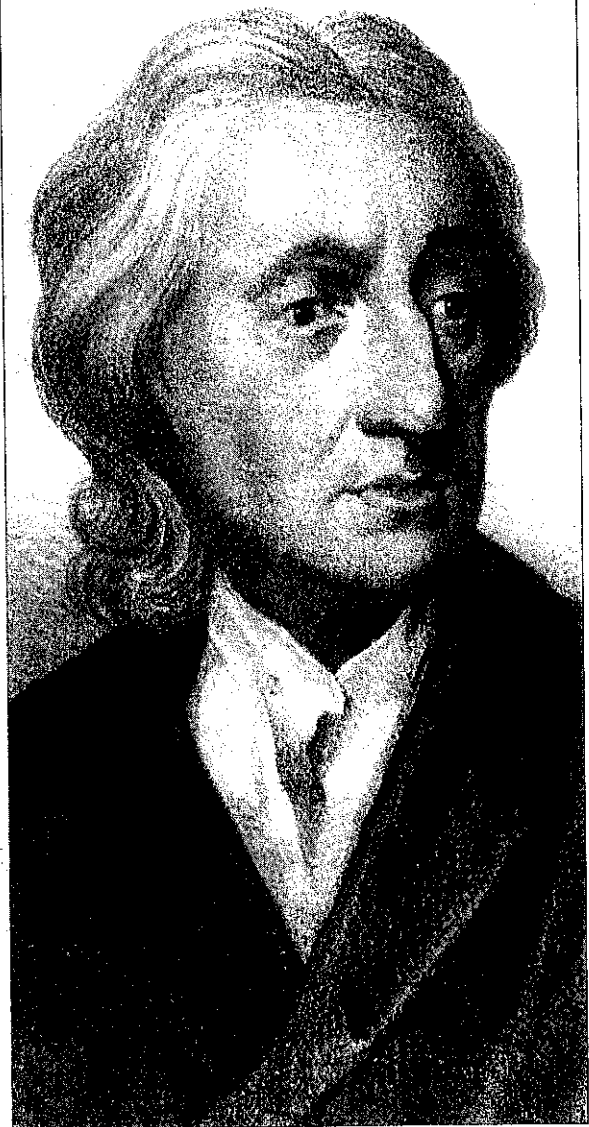
consent
natural rights
purpose of government
social contract
state of nature

How did the ideas of John Locke influence the Founders?

The Founders were students of history and philosophy. They studied books, read newspapers, and listened to sermons in church. The Founders discussed and exchanged ideas with each other and with other people.

One philosopher whose writings influenced the thinking of the Founders was John Locke. John Locke was a well-known English philosopher. He lived from 1632 to 1704. Locke published a book called *Two Treatises of Government* in 1689. In that book Locke explained his ideas about natural rights. Locke's book was widely read and discussed in the American colonies. Many of the Founders' ideas about government were based on Locke's philosophy.

John Locke arrived at his ideas by imagining what life might be like if people were living in a **state of nature**. By this, Locke did not mean necessarily that people lived in the wilderness. Locke simply saw a state of nature as a condition in which no governments or laws existed at all.



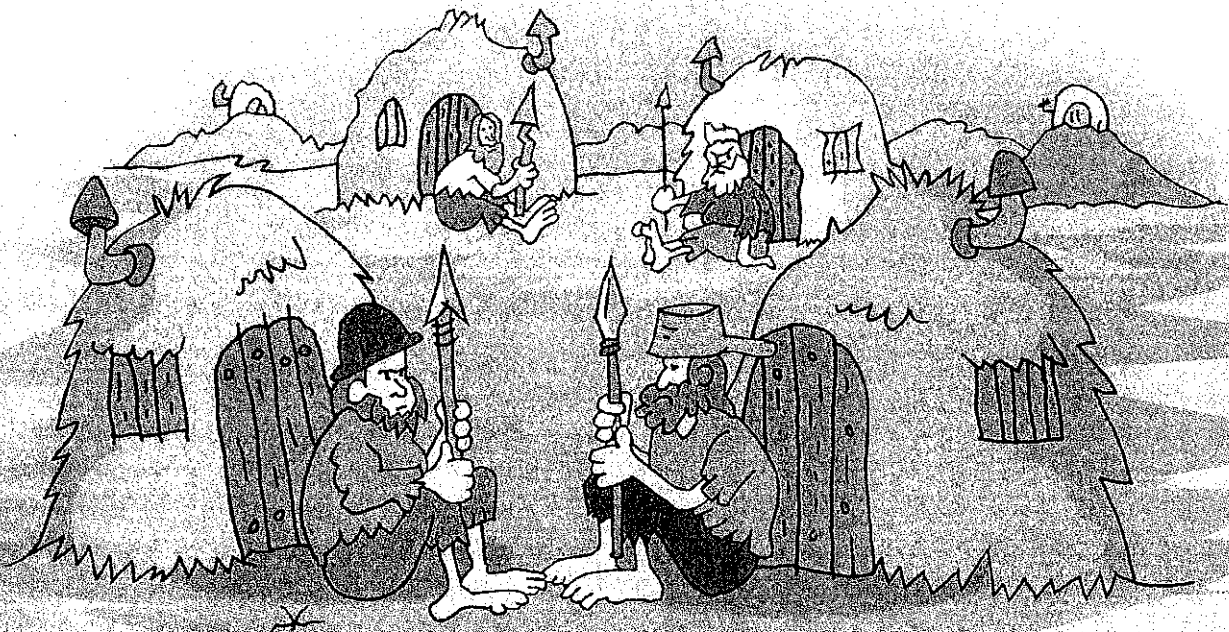
What did John Locke mean by a state of nature?

What might life be like in a state of nature?

It is now your turn to be a philosopher like John Locke. First, imagine that you and all the students in your school are living in a state of nature. You have plenty of food and other resources to maintain life and to live well. But there is no government and there are no laws or rules that you have to follow. There is no one to tell you what to do and no one to protect you.

With your partner or group discuss the following questions about your rights in a state of nature. Be prepared to share your ideas with your class. Finally, compare your ideas with those of John Locke—after you read the section “What were Locke’s ideas about natural rights?”

- ① What might be some advantages and disadvantages of living in a state of nature?
- ② What rights, if any, might you expect to have in a state of nature?
- ③ What might people who are stronger or smarter than others try to do? Why?
- ④ What might people who are weaker or less skilled than others try to do? Why?
- ⑤ What might life be like for everyone living in a state of nature?
- ⑥ Would anyone have the right to govern you? Would you have a right to govern anyone else? Why?
- ⑦ What are some things the people could do to protect their lives, liberty, or property?



By imagining life in a state of nature, Locke was able to answer some important questions like these:

- What is human nature? For example, are all people mainly interested in their own welfare, or do they tend to care for the good of others?
- What should be the main purpose of government?
- How do people who run government get the right to govern?
- What kinds of government should people support and obey?
- What kinds of government should people resist?

The Founders discussed and debated John Locke's answers to these questions. The ideas of Locke were used in the

Declaration of Independence to explain why Americans were opposed to British rule in the colonies. After winning the Revolutionary War, the Founders used most of the same ideas to write their state constitutions. The ideas of the natural rights philosophy also are important to the kind of government that we have today.

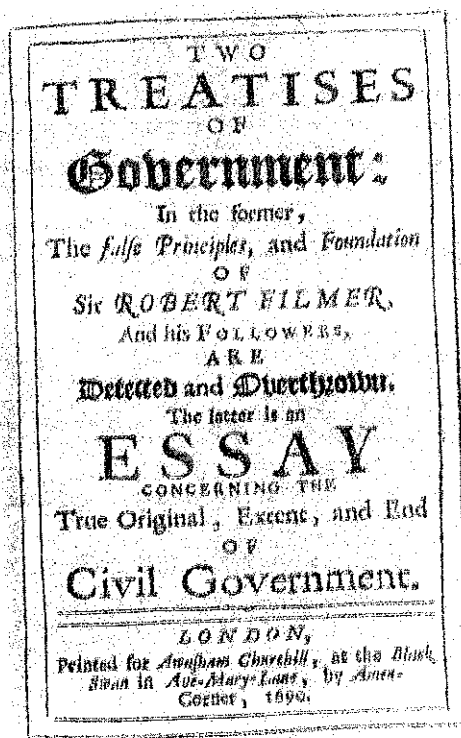
What were Locke's ideas about natural rights?

John Locke believed that through reasoning we can determine what rights people would have in a state of nature.

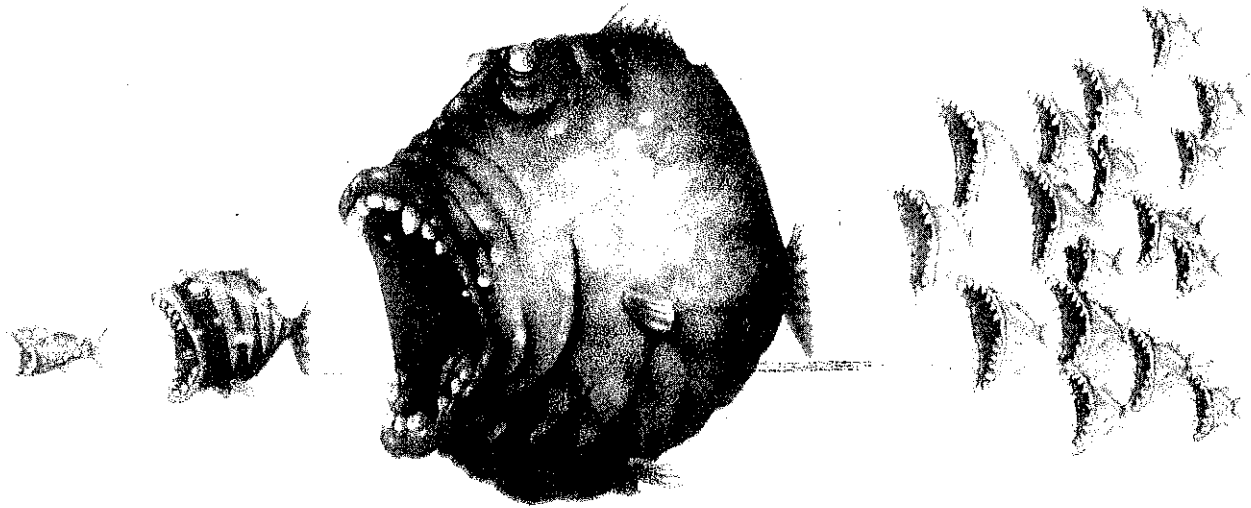
Locke reasoned that in a state of nature all people seek to have the following rights:

- **Life** People want to survive. People want to be as safe as possible from threats to their lives.
- **Liberty** People want to be as free as possible. People want to be able to make their own decisions and to live as they please.
- **Property** People want to own the things that are necessary to survive, such as food, houses, tools, or land. People want the freedom to work and to gain economic benefits.

Locke said that the rights to life, liberty, and property are natural rights. These rights are a part of the law of nature. This means that all people have the rights to life, liberty, and property just because they are human beings.



What were Locke's ideas about natural rights?



How does this illustration demonstrate what might happen in a state of nature?

The Founders believed that such rights as those to life, liberty, and property are not man-made. Instead, our rights are based on the laws of nature, which were made by God. The Declaration of Independence, for example, speaks of "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God." It says that people are "endowed by their Creator" with certain basic rights and that no one may take away these rights.

What did John Locke say might happen in a state of nature?

- ① Locke believed that most people are reasonable and good. Most people respect the rights of others because their conscience tells them that they have a duty to do so. But people are also driven by their self-interest. A few humans are not so reasonable and good. Sometimes people who are stronger or more skilled abuse those who are weaker or less skilled.
- ② Locke believed that in a state of nature, people protect their natural rights by using their own strength and skill. People who are weaker or less skilled would find it very hard to protect their rights. Instead, weaker people would try to protect their rights by joining together against the strong.
- ③ Locke believed that in a state of nature, no one's life, liberty, or property would be safe. People would feel insecure. In a state of nature, there are no governments or laws to protect life, liberty, or property. This is why people agreed to form governments. According to Locke, governments do not exist until people create them.
- ④ Locke believed that in a state of nature, no one would have the right to govern you, and you would not have the right to govern anyone else.
- ⑤ According to Locke, there is only one way that people get the right to govern anyone else: the people to be governed must give their consent. **Consent** means to approve of something or allow something to take place. If the people have not given their consent to create a government, there is no legitimate government. In other words, the power of legitimate government comes from the consent of the people.

Why do people agree to form a social contract?

Although people agreed that certain natural rights existed, they worried about how those rights could be protected. In a state of nature, people might feel free to do anything they want to do. Their rights would not be protected, however, and that would make them feel insecure.

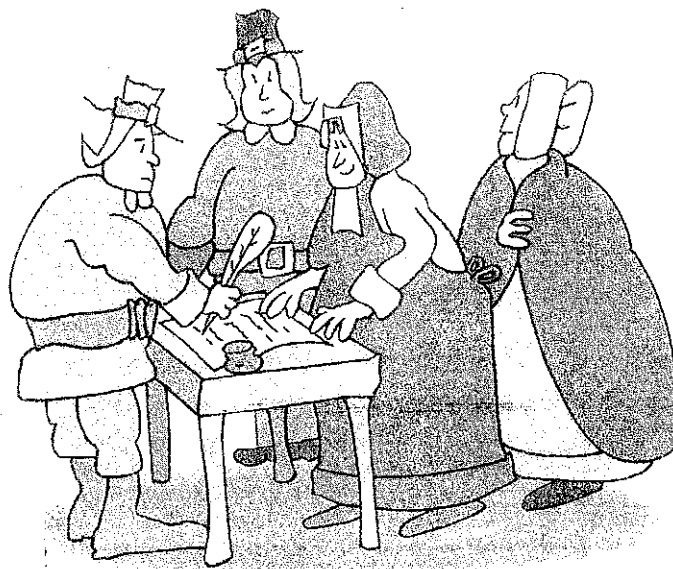
For John Locke and other natural rights philosophers, the great problem was to find a way to protect each person's natural rights so that everyone could enjoy them and live at peace with one another. Locke said that the best way to solve this problem is for each individual to agree with others to create and live under a government and give that government the power to make and enforce laws. Locke called this kind of agreement a **social contract**.

As in all contracts, to get something you must give up something. In a social contract everyone promises to give up the absolute right to do anything she or he

wants to do. Absolute means without any limits. In return, everyone receives the security that can be provided by a government. Each person consents to obey the limits placed upon her or him by the laws created by the government. Everyone gains the security of knowing that their rights to life, liberty, and property are protected.

Government, then, is the better alternative to a state of nature, which would be imperfect because some people might not respect the rights of others. According to Locke, the main **purpose of government** is to protect those natural rights that the individual cannot effectively protect in a state of nature.

In a later lesson, you will study the Declaration of Independence. You will see how the Founders included all the ideas that you have studied in this lesson. You will also learn to examine questions about what kind of government the people should support and obey and what kind they should resist.



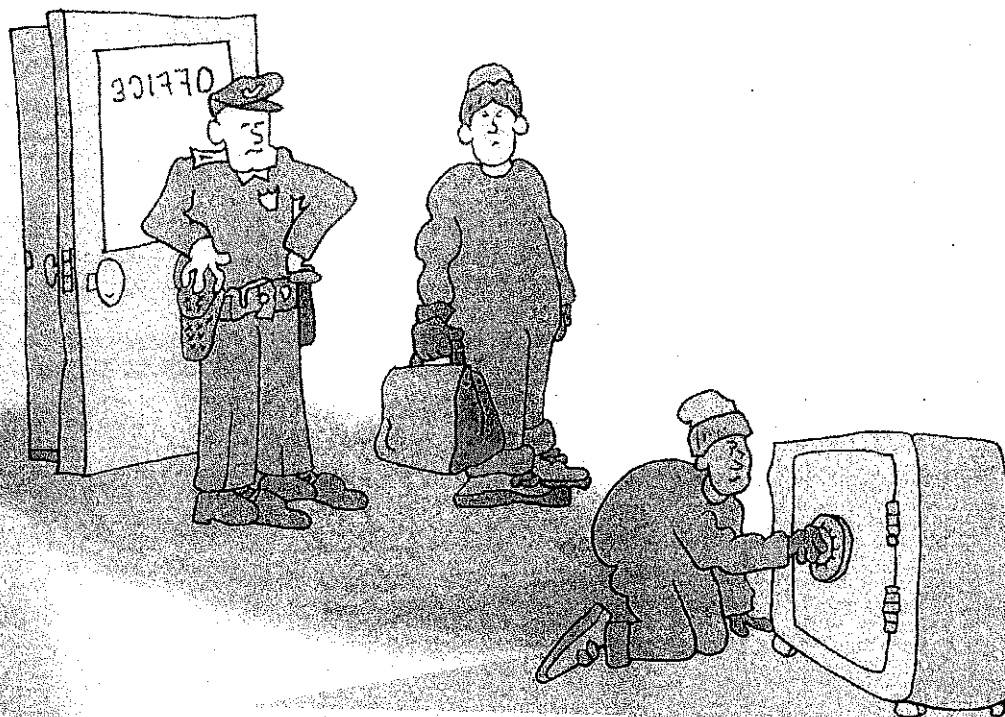
How might individuals protect their natural rights in a state of nature?

What rights do you think all people should have?

Most people would agree that there are certain rights all people should have. For example, you probably agree that everyone has the right to be protected from robbers and murderers. You probably also agree that a person's right to vote should be protected. Most people in the United States share the belief that everyone should have these rights.

Work with a partner or in a group of three students. Together answer the questions that follow. Be prepared to share your ideas with the class.

- ① List five rights that you think all people in our nation should have. Why do you think that it is important that all people should have these rights?
- ② Which of the rights on your list seem to be the most important? Arrange the rights you listed in the order of their importance. Explain why you ranked the rights on your list in this order.
- ③ What might you do in order to ensure that these rights are protected?



In a state of nature, how might one's life, liberty, or property be protected?

LESSON REVIEW

- ① What are natural rights? How do people get their natural rights?
- ② What might life be like for people living in a state of nature? Explain.
- ③ Where does government get its right to govern, according to the natural rights philosophy?
- ④ What is a social contract?
- ⑤ What is the main purpose of government according to John Locke?

ACTIVITIES

- ① In this lesson you learned about the social contract. Most passengers aboard the *Mayflower* signed the Mayflower Compact in 1620, before the ship landed in Plymouth. Read the Mayflower Compact below. Write a brief essay explaining how the Mayflower Compact is an example of a social contract.

Having undertaken, for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian Faith and Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the First Colony in the Northern Parts of Virginia, do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and of one another, Covenant and Combine ourselves together into a Civil Body Politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof, to enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions, and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.

- ② Draw a cartoon that illustrates what life might be like in a state of nature. Use your cartoon to illustrate why we need government.
- ③ Read *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. It is a novel about what happened when a group of young boys found themselves in a situation where there were no laws and no government. Share the story with your class. Does this story support Locke's ideas? If so, which ones?
- ④ Write a short story that tells how the rights to life, liberty, and property apply to you and your family. Share your story with the class.